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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the effects of computer-based technologies on literature discussions between preservice teachers and eighth graders. Most participating preservice teachers were preparing to work with students in literacy development. Over two semesters, eighth graders were paired with college students taking a young adults literature course. The pairs read and discussed multicultural short stories for teens, poetry, essays on multiculturalism, and novels. Electronic mail helped foster relationships between pairs. An electronic bulletin board allowed all participants to interact asynchronously with the entire group around various topics. Small groups met in virtual environments (MOOs) to conduct online literature circles. Data sources included surveys on technology needs; e-mail correspondence; process logs; interview transcripts from student focus groups; researchers' planning notes and logs; and teacher and student analyses of the MOOs. Results indicated that MOOs provided space for fuller participation by more people. Eighth graders appreciated being able to speak more freely and anonymously than they could in class. University students appreciated opportunities to discuss literature with adolescents. Both groups were surprised at the number of in depth issues they discussed. Complaints about the MOOs included the anonymity factor (for some students), eye strain, and insufficient typing skills. (Contains 15 references.) (SM)

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On-line Multicultural Literature Discussions: How this Discourse Community Informs Teacher Educators

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Description

The study reported in this paper is the second phase of an investigation of the effects of computer-based technologies on literature discussions between pre-service teachers and local 8th graders, for the purpose of discovering which structures, formats, methods of preparation, and types of materials which aid students in critical reading and which support effective literature discussion on line. Effective discussion may be defined as that which sustains dialogue on the central issues of the story or features of the writing; that invites and supports maximum participation from all involved; and that leaves the reader with more knowledge, insight, and/or understanding than before the discussion.

Further, it was an attempt to learn from this new electronic classroom how we can join diverse groups of people from different locations, people whose ideas and responses are as varied as the cultures in which they live. Because the literature being read and discussed was multicultural in theme and character, an additional purpose was to promote the reading of such literature through exposure and study and use it as a medium to discuss issues of diversity. In doing so, we hoped to enlarge the understanding of both groups of students on what it means to be a diverse society and to foster appreciation for the diversity that characterizes their local societies.

Teacher education programs working with primarily white, middle class pre-service teachers (such as my program), must make efforts to prepare them to work with diverse people and ideas (Willis & Harris, 1998). Students must confront notions they harbor about their own cultures as well as about diverse cultures. In order to do so, our classrooms need to become transformational spaces (Banks, 1988). What colleague Donna Logan and I were and are hoping to find are transformational spaces in an electronic discourse community, where "language and literacy theories, pedagogical practice, and technology" meet (Butler, 1998, p. 558). The last few years of studying this community

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will serve, we hope, as a model for further outreach as we explore the possibilities of adding more distant, diverse sites to our group.

An electronic discourse community holds the promise of opening up spaces for marginalized individuals to participate more fully than in the regular classroom (Butler). By the same token marginalized ideas may be discussed more freely and fully and with greater possibility to engender social change. In many literature classrooms, large numbers of students, social pressures of adolescence, and efferent stances taken by teachers prevent "real talk" (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986), that is, the kind of dialogue that draws out responses, stimulates thought, and challenges attitudes and beliefs by expression, careful listening, and response. Although an electronic discourse community will not address all of the negative conditions of the classroom--indeed, it has its own negative aspects--what is of concern in this research is the power that it may hold to contribute to the transformational process in our schools and, eventually, our communities and larger societies.

Participants

Since the beginning of the collaboration in 1997, which we call the "Web Pal Project," middle school colleague Donna Logan and I have paired each student in my university young adult literature class with a middle school student who applies to work with Ms. Logan for the duration of at least one semester.

Most of the university students enrolled in the class are preparing for professions in which they work with young people in literacy development, e.g., teaching, library and media specialists, and social work. Their 8th grade pals at the middle school (BMS), represented the larger international population of the town and included several nationalities and ethnicities, e.g., Pakistani, Arab, Chinese, Indian, Thai, Japanese, Korean, African American and European American. Criteria for selection of the BMS pals were a willingness to read and discuss books with a university student, commitment to participate in several on-line formats, and permission from parents. The project is voluntary for the middle school students and required for the university students.

Donna and I see our roles as teacher researchers, as we examine the effects of the project on our students and our classroom communities (Britton, 1987; Patterson, Stansell, & Lee, 1990; Hubbard & Power, 1993). Informed by a reader response approach, as articulated by Rosenblatt (1983, 1978), we see ourselves as teacher researchers engaged in collaborative inquiry (Churchill, 1996).

As the leader of the BMS pals, Donna's investment has been great. From the beginning she has been my partner in planning, reflecting, and, during the first year,

informally analyzing our work. Since the second year, Donna has joined me in every aspect of the research as often as possible, including interviews, analysis, and writing. As a county gifted coordinator in charge of the town middle and high schools, Donna is obligated to provide services for those who have been identified gifted. However, from the beginning of this work in 1997, Donna has made the project available to any 8th grader. Therefore, although over half of the web pals each semester are officially "identified" as gifted, the others are not. Donna is concerned with providing opportunities for gifted and those not officially so identified to succeed and to flourish through differentiated education. This project is part of her efforts on behalf of all of the 8th grade students.

Woven into the young adult literature methods and materials course I teach, the project allows me to create multiple opportunities for my students to transact literacy as they struggle to build mutually-beneficial learning partnerships with local students. Kinchloe's (1991) concept of critical research in teacher education is also salient: "When inquiry is pushed into a critical dimension teacher educators will address the process of how professional consciousness is formed, how ideology contributes to the teacher's definition of self" (p. 15). Considering the homogeneity of the mostly white, middle-class population of my classes, an examination of ideology is paramount. Through the numerous readings and assignments associated with the project and the course, my students, in particular, take a look at how their past experiences and socializations as well as their current contexts, work together to sustain an ideology that affects their decision-making processes, consciously or not.

And, finally, following Bromley (1998) and Sclove, (1998), Donna and I are concerned with investigating the new technologies we implement in order to, as Bromley urges, exercise informed judgment, just as we would in the introduction of any new strategy or learning tool.

Procedures

Each year of the project since its beginning in 1997, we have followed a fairly simple pattern. In the fall semester, Donna introduces the middle school students to the project, and the students who are selected--enough to match the number of students in my course--make a commitment for one semester. They choose a pal from my class with whom to correspond for the semester. At the end of the semester, my group of students complete the course, signaling for them the end of the project (though not always of the correspondence). Their pals have the option (unless they are asked not to return) of participating during the second semester.

In the fall of 1998, 17 middle school pals participated. In the spring, the semester featured in this paper, 5 of those pals opted not to participate. Because 21 university students were enrolled for the spring semester, Donna recruited 8 new middle school pals to join the 13 returning ones.

During the semester, the pairs read and discussed multicultural short stories from an anthology written for teenagers entitled Join In, poetry from various authors, essays on multiculturalism, and a novel. E-mail was used to foster the relationship between the pairs. An electronic bulletin board--we used NetForum--allowed individuals from both classes to interact asynchronously with the entire group around topics related to poems and an essay on multiculturalism. Finally, small groups comprised of web pal pairs who read the same multicultural novel met in virtual environments known as MOOs to conduct online literature circles.

As "multiple object oriented environments" (Haynes & Holmevik, 1998), the MOOs allow students to move from room to room in a virtual house that was created by our technical assistant solely for our use; other groups on or off campus would not have access to it without a VT password, making it a protected environment. Although it contains only one dining room, in each of the other rooms we hoped to foster the essence of Atwell's (1998) dining room table talk where guests' discussions about books are a provocative mix of chatter, anaylsis, question, and opinion.

In earlier works (Carico, 1998, 1999), I describe the 1997-98 year, a year of much trial and error, but one, too, of great excitement. The foci of this paper are the MOOs of second semester of 1998-99: preparation, structure, and content and their resulting effect on the literature discussions. I chose the second semester of 1998-99 for two reasons: 1) a technology glitch created a unique opportunity for the students to participate in both remote and face to face (FTF) chats, and (2) it was after the second semester that Donna and I were able to conduct interviews and MOO analyses with the students.

Data Sources

Data sources include the following: surveys on technology needs; e-mail correspondence recording shared responses to the literature; process logs of participants; interviews transcripts from focus groups; teacher researchers' planning notes and logs, MOO transcripts and analyses. Student analysis of MOOs focuses on the MOO content to determine the range and depth of issues discussed as well as participation levels and discussion strategies. Teacher analysis of the MOO transcripts includes a content analysis focusing on issues and threads and the participation patterns of the students and hosts.

The MOOs

Two MOOs are planned for each semester: one approximately one month into the semester on three short stories from Join In, and one a month later on a novel with multicultural characters and themes. Lasting approximately 1 1/2 hours, the usual MOO procedure begins with a 10 minute "roaming" time, allowing students to learn how to negotiate the virtual spaces and to chat freely with their pals, (with whom they have not chatted synchronously until this point) and with others with whom they may not be assigned in the later discussions. Next, the students move to their assigned rooms to discuss a work. During the short story MOOs, the students discuss three stories, necessitating a move to three different rooms throughout the course of the evening. During the 2nd MOO discussion on the novels, because the students remain in one room, we organize a "warm-up" chat in a different room centered around a related poem. Each room has a host, a position most often filled by the 8th grade language arts teachers, with the county K-12 language arts supervisor and gifted coordinator supplementing as needed.

Following the MOO are a series of interviews with focus groups of students and the hosts to determine the satisfaction level of the participants and the effectiveness of the discussions as well as to note concerns and discuss questions. In addition, students analyze the MOOs for content and to critique their own discussion strategies and participation styles.

Discussion of multicultural short stories: The "fake" MOO

Between the first and second semester, unbeknownst to Donna, the technology coordinator for the county put up firewalls, which did not permit the BMS students to make electronic contact with the VT network. On the day of the first MOO, which was to cover three stories from Join In, Donna discovered she could not log on to the MOO site. Since the hosts and students were prepared, and since the school is three blocks from the VT campus, we piled into cars and went to the school for an unexpected face-to-face (FTF) encounter, what the students would thereafter refer to as the "fake" MOO. Instead of meeting in virtual rooms, the groups moved to each host's classroom to discuss the stories they read.

Though disappointing in some respects, largely because most of the university students had not MOOed before, they were delighted to meet the pals face to face. Their relief was evident in their logs, replacing the fear that they would not know how to interact and respond to an adolescent. The most striking feature of the data on the university students' reactions was the recurrent notation of their great surprise. They had not

expected the 8th graders to be as "intelligent," "deep," and "interesting in their differences of opinions." For many, this was the beginning of what would be a growing realization that they might not, after all, mind working with this age group.

Regarding the format, however, conflicting opinions within individuals and among the group characterized the reactions to the discussions. (This pattern of divided opinions would also characterize reactions to the second MOO later in the semester.) A few students reported their pals as "reluctant" to talk, understandably so, they thought, due to the unexpected surprise of meeting in person and having to discuss literature face to face with college students. More were impressed with the pals' willingness to engage and to interact easily with both older students and with what my students judged to be "mature" and "intense" subject matter, e.g., hatred, rape, racism. With the exception of one who was disappointed that they met the pals "prematurely," that is, before the end-of-the-semester dinner, the rest of the students from both groups were pleased with the encounter.

Electronic literature circles: The "real" MOO

To prepare for this MOO, the middle school pals were to choose a book from a group of several possible choices, inform their VT pals of their choice and set up a reading schedule. Through e-mail, they were to discuss the book they were reading in the weeks before the MOO. One week before the MOO, Donna and I sent out further instructions that we hoped would both facilitate an electronic discussion and focus the students on particular themes. (See Appendix B.)

For the discussion itself, we kept the pairs together, arranging them in two different rooms for the MOO. In the first room, sets of pairs met to read and discuss "At the Electronic Frontier," a poem which records the numerous ways technology has influenced society. The pairs were then distributed across six rooms according to the books they had read: Dangerous Skies, The Joy Luck Club, April and the Dragon Lady, The Bean Trees, Parrot in the Oven, and The Ear, the Eye, and the Arm. (See Appendix A for bibliographic information.) Data from process logs, e-mails, reflection papers, MOO analyses, and focus group interviews indicates several characteristics that made the MOO both satisfying and unsatisfying as an educational experience.

Characteristics that Made the MOO a Satisfying Experience.

Hey, diddle diddle,
Answer this riddle:
What in the world is a MOO?
It's a place we can talk
Without taking a walk,
And where everyone can share his or her view.

Davina, VT student

Davina's light-hearted assessment does represent the view of most of the students and suggests consonance with Butler's (1998) research that the MOO does provide spaces for fuller participation by more people. The students indicated pleasure in being able to speak more freely than in the regular classroom, without constraints imposed either by classroom structures or by peer pressure. They valued the opportunity to speak candidly, to express whatever thoughts they had about the book and to see that their thoughts were valued by others as they received immediate responses.

First, students enjoyed what they described as the freedom to interact without what they perceived as constraints of face-to-face interactions. Though the students were all recognized by first names during the discussions, they still felt anonymous--therefore, free. Absent was the sensation of being "stared at" or "gawked at" by other people, a practice they said inhibits the formulation of a response or question in face-to-face classroom conversations. And, 13 -year-old Charlie's admission indicates that the anonymity works both ways: "I didn't have to look anyone in the eye."

Absent too, was the pressure of thinking about how one looks or acts. What one says becomes the focus. For adolescents whose often sudden ability to think outside themselves gives them a painful awareness of what Elkind (1988) calls "the invisible audience," this anonymity is a relief.

Related to the issue of anonymity was the change in power differentials. For the middle schoolers, the pressure of having to say the "right thing" in front of teachers was noticeably absent. Although many of the middle school students were in a room hosted by their classroom teachers, they reportedly sensed an unspoken permission to speak freely. And, though there have been infrequent episodes of silliness in previous semesters on the part of new participants (including some University students), this sense of freedom did not seem to include an accompanying sense of license to flame, to harass, or to intentionally disrupt the conversations. During this particular MOO, there was no talk that could be considered inappropriate in any of those ways. Still, the middle school students

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got the distinct sense that they were acting in ways that would not be acceptable in school. "In the classroom," Jerry said, "the teacher talks and asks questions." In the MOO, the teacher, he went on to say, "was not trying to be like a teacher."

Charlie added, "I was able to bring up topics, say things." Charlie's assessment was a true one. In the "Joy Luck Club" room with two other BMS students, five VT students, and the county K-12 language arts supervisor acting as host, Charlie interacted freely, often, and on various topics: making a joke, sharing personal responses, admonishing the group to "stay on target," and offering opinions about the characters, the symbolism of the pendant, and the notion of America as a mosaic. In the same interview, Chris, a new BMS friend Charlie made through the web pals, reported that he was able to say things that went against other people. Indeed, as the lone middle schooler in a group of four VT students and their host discussing Dangerous Skies, Chris initiated topics, asked questions, persisted in his request to discuss a passage when he was temporarily ignored, and disagreed with the opinions of others in the room over the question of the effects of culture on an individual. His enthusiasm for this discussion was in contrast to his dislike for the "fake MOO," where, he said, "everybody's looking at you."

For the university students, the opportunity to discuss the novels with the adolescents was, perhaps, the most significant aspect of the Web Pal Project. They heard the responses and questions of various 13-year-olds related to the novel; witnessed their interpretations of the poem first-hand as they all tried to make sense of it together, and worked as partners with the kids to create a common and enjoyable "dining room table" session for the group.

And for the VT students in the discussion of Dangerous Skies, where Chris alone represented the middle schoolers (and where those who didn't know him assumed that he was a girl), the students didn't appear to be aware that there was only one 8th grader in their room. One VT student's notation about the obvious dissolution of typical classroom structures seems to characterize their response as well as that of others in different rooms: "I believe if I didn't know who was "in charge" it would be hard, though not impossible, to tell who was in 8th grade and who was in charge" (Steve).

Last, what made it satisfactory was the effectiveness of the discussions. For the middle schoolers, some of whom are loners and or on the fringes of the class social structures, the book discussions were an opportunity to, as Eric put it "talk with people who care about books." Even the students who did not prefer the format admitted, usually after analyzing the transcripts, that the discussions generated in the rooms were thoughtful examinations of the issues and characters in the books. VT student Diane, quite

disappointed initially with what she deemed silly behavior of her classmates in their "Dangerous Skies" room, made an in-depth analysis of the transcripts.

"Overall, there was some good discussion during our MOO. The group members raised some interesting issues, ideas and feelings. They tried to help each other understand the novel. Even though this conversation was a little too silly for my taste, I do think it was fruitful overall and worthwhile to do again."

Students from both groups were surprised at the number of issues they were able to discuss, often in some depth. They expressed appreciation at the wide variety of opinions and interpretations they were able to hear and the opportunity to "put it together," as one middle schooler said.

In just one example, the Joy Luck Club room, one of the larger ones, covered 13 topics during their 30 minute conversation. The host began with one question: "Anybody have a burning thought to get us started?" The students took the conversation over, and each of the participants, with the exception of the host, who was never heard from again, began to share their ideas and questions about the story. This room contained five VT students: one female African/Japanese American, one female Caribbean islander, three European Americans—one male; and three BMS students: one male European American, one female Japanese American, and one Indian American. The topics covered included related general issues (e.g., transitions immigrants face, what it means to be an American, mother-daughter relationships—in American and other cultures); issues specific to the characters or plot (e.g., the mother leaving the twins; the meaning of the pendant; rules in American v. Asian cultures); and emotional reactions to the book. Most of the discussion was spent on American v. Asian experiences and rules, the meaning of the pendant, or "life purpose" and how that tied in with the characters' actions; and relating to parents. These required fairly sophisticated interpretation and analysis of the novel.

Characteristics that made the MOO an unsatisfactory experience. Curiously, for some students, most clearly three middle school girls and two VT females, the anonymity that worked to free so many of the others to speak their minds, served to distance these young women from their classmates and pals. They noted the absence of obvious signals of body language that would indicate to others how to interpret a statement, what one student called the "motives" in what they were saying. "We don't know the people, so it's hard to know how they'll take your comments." Sherri expressed relief that she had been able to meet her pal at the "fake" MOO. "You know their sense of humor," she said.

In both groups, the two most-frequently cited complaints were related to eye strain and the fact that conversation is carried out through type. Taking one of the students'

suggestions, we have now inserted a break in the MOO schedule between the first room and the second, which does alleviate eye strain somewhat.

The inability to type quickly is a definite hindrance and not quite as easily solved, nor is the inability to spell. The differences between accurate and inaccurate spellers, however, is somewhat ameliorated by the fact that fast typing produces errors even in the best spellers. In addition, a shorthand that the middle schoolers seem to use more readily than the rest of us, does mask some spelling differences. And, though it did not help in the actual MOO, when Donna and I prepare the transcripts for distribution on the website, we do correct glaring spelling errors, particularly in cases where we know the students are sensitive about it.

The nature of the MOO as a text-based discourse that takes place in real time has difficulties that go beyond simple typing problems, however. A small number of students in both rooms, again, all female, described a feeling of stress at their difficulty in both keeping up with the conversation and contributing satisfactorily to it. Indeed, if there are large numbers of people in the room and if those people all "talk" fast, that is, type constantly, then the flow of topics could take several paths, making them difficult to trace and respond to. Since the screen scrolls after it fills up with text, the topics seem to "disappear." Although only a distraction for some, these few students were distressed and frustrated at their inability to share opinions as often as they wanted or simply participate as when they chose to. Some have resolved it by following only one line of conversation, deciding not to contribute to every topic raised. We have also tried various strategies with the hosts to ensure that all voices are solicited.

Although this difficulty may seem to be somewhat a matter of personal preference, there is another sense in which it is clearly problematic, an aspect that did not emerge until the MOO analysis with the middle school students. As part of the analysis of the transcripts, the students highlighted each of their contributions to the discussion and then categorized them according to suggested codes: factual, connecting, imagining, evaluative. We then asked them to write what they thought was the value of their contributions and what they might like to change. In response, the BMS students asked us if they could add new codes: P for Personal; A for "I Agree"; and T for Typo. The desire for the 2nd category became apparent in Cherie's written comment: "Well, in this MOO a lot of my contributions were "agreeing" because people went so fast that I didn't want to say the same thing twice and feel stupid, so I just agreed!" Other students from both groups confirmed that they, too, had this difficulty. Therefore, when they critiqued each others' contributions, it was important that they understand the possible factors that they couldn't

see on the transcripts, thus, to develop questions in response to analysis rather than judgments.

Conclusions and Implications

As Bromley (1998) and Sclove (1998) caution and the data from this study suggests, there is work to be done to make the electronic MOO spaces truly democratic as well as effective in meeting the traditional aims of classroom literature study. Students indicated changes in understanding of the elements of the story as well as appreciation for the characters' diverse circumstances; however, both Donna and I realize that we need more in-depth analysis and follow-up discussions of the MOO content with large and small groups. Students also indicate a need for further negotiation of talk in this written format. Time needs to be taken in class or in small groups to consider the effects of differing beliefs, attitudes and conversational styles on discussions, whether on line or in person. Discussions concerning the effect of power differentials in the virtual spaces may be instructive in helping us enhance our in-class discussions. Considerations must be also be made concerning the feasibility of transferring an on-line study into the regular classroom.

Lastly, the effect of the MOO cannot be judged apart from the other components of the project which supports it. The language of the students changed as they talked about the belief structures of others and their sometimes new ability to understand and tolerate the differences, but those changes did not take place solely because of the MOO. The new language came directly from an assignment they had done preceding the MOO in which they examined their own cultural lenses. The MOO gave them a place to exercise their beliefs. The positive nature of the MOO that most experienced, we believe, was fostered by the e-mail letters that preceded it. In addition, the more time we spent in our individual classes on the project, helping students with letter writing, with the reading, with strategies for response, the more satisfactory were their overall experiences.

We will continue this work because we believe it is significant in the development of teachers who can talk about difference, who can work with students of diversity, and who can understand their own biases, lenses, and predispositions. It is significant in the development of critical readers and writers who learn, as Friere says, to "read the word and the world."

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Appendix A: Novels, Short Stories Discussed in the MOOs

Farmer, N. (1995). The ear, the eye, and the arm. New York: Puffin.

Gallo, D. (Ed.). (1993). Join in : Multiethnic short stories by outstanding writers for young adults. New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell.

Kingsolver, B. (1998). The bean trees. New York: Harper Collins.

Martinez, V. (1996). Parrot in the oven: *mi vida*. New York: Harper Trophy.

Namioka, L. (1994). April and the dragon lady. Orlando: Harcourt, Brace & Company.

Staples, S. (1996). Dangerous skies. New York: Harper Trophy.

Tan, A. The joy luck club. Ivy Books.

APPENDIX: Instructions for participation in the novel MOO

MOO Discussion Questions

Please bring the book to the MOO. Read over the questions or discussion topics below and tag any passages in the book that would be appropriate to add to the discussion. (Sticky notes are often helpful to mark passages.) You do not have to have written responses ready unless they would help you in the discussion.

I. The Reading Experience:

- How was the book set up? What about the structure of the book helped or hindered your reading?
- What impressed, surprised, or upset you the most in your reading of the book?
- Did the different culture or customs of the characters affect the way you read the book?
- Do you have any questions about the book in general?

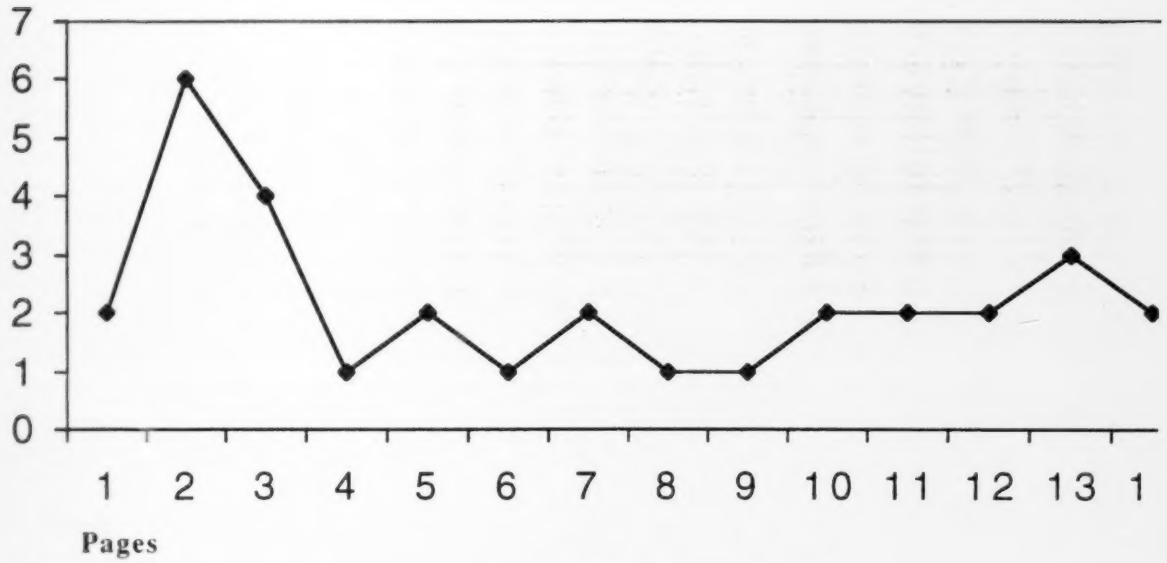
II. Identify a passage in the book that you think describes well an experience of living in that particular culture.

III. Discuss the experiences (both positive and negative) that the characters had as a result of being part of two different cultures.

IV. If you can, relate some of the above experiences to your own life or to someone you know.

V. Discuss the author's style, use of language, or anything else about the book that made this book stand out for you in a positive or negative way.

The Joy Luck Club



Topics

1.Emotional reactions to book

2.Opinions about male characters

3. Mother daughter relationships
4. Leaving the twins
5. Transitions immigrants face
6. Characters hard to follow
7. What does it mean to be an American
8. Mothers/daughters in other cultures
9. Rules in American vs. Asian cultures
10. Pendant/ Life purpose
11. Knowing parents/ relating to them
12. Movie version
13. The ending.